



Natural Heritage
& Endangered Species
Program

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Division of Fisheries & Wildlife
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American Bittern
(*Botaurus lentiginosus*)

State Status: **Endangered**

DESCRIPTION: The American Bittern is a medium-sized (23-34 in. 58-68 cm long) brown, streaked ground-dwelling heron which spends most of its time hidden among marshland vegetation. Its upper parts are mottled with brown and buff, while the under parts are streaked with brown and white. The short thick neck has a black stripe or patch on each side, and the throat is white with thick black streaks. The top of the head is usually darker than the body, or sometimes rusty. There is a buffy stripe over each of the yellow eyes. The bill, legs and feet are pale yellow or yellowish-green. Wingspread is from 32 to 50 in (80-106 cm) and the black wing tips are conspicuous in flight. The relatively short tail is rounded and mottled brown.



By Bill Fournier

SIMILAR SPECIES: Immature Night Herons are grayer and more spotted than the American Bittern and frequently perch in trees. The Least Bittern is small with buffy wing patches.

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS: The American Bittern inhabits freshwater marshes, meadows, fens and bogs dominated by emergent vegetation such as cattails, bulrushes, sedges and grasses. It may also occur in brackish wetlands.

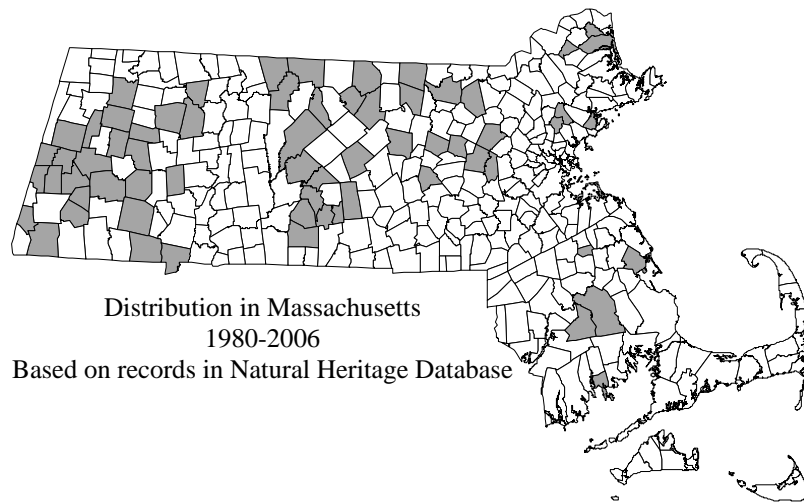
BEHAVIOR: The American Bittern spends most of its time hidden among marshland vegetation. It walks slowly and stealthily. When startled, the bittern assumes what is perhaps its most characteristic stance: standing frozen with the bill pointed skywards, in order to camouflage itself among the reeds, occasionally swaying from side to side with the vegetation as if blown by the wind. When flushed from a marsh, it gives “kok kok kok” call or a nasal “haink”, its wings flap loosely, feet dangle and it flies off slowly, but with rapid wing beats. The distinctive call is loud and guttural; the notes sound like an old-fashioned pump, usually in three syllables, the middle one sharply accented; “oonk-a-lunk” or “oong-ka-chook”. Pumping calls are usually heard at dusk, or dawn in spring or early summer.

MATING/BREEDING HABITS: Courtship behavior is not well understood, but is known to include aerial and ground chases. Males slowly stalk females as they display a pair of white fanlike plumes raised over the back and shoulders. Usually, bitterns nest in marshes, but may also nest in grassy upland fields adjacent to wetlands. Males appear to be territorial throughout the breeding season, and remain in the nest-site vicinity. Males may be polygynous. The female builds the nest and cares for the young. The nest, about a foot (30 cm) in diameter, is located either on the ground in dense vegetation or on a platform about a foot above the water. Nest

material includes dead reeds, cattails, grasses, and sedges. The 3 to 5 buff-brown to olive-brown eggs are laid at 1 day intervals with incubation beginning with the laying of the first egg. An egg hatches about 24 days after it was laid. Young are fed by regurgitation at the nest for about 2 weeks. The female continues to tend the young for an undetermined length of time after they leave the nest. There is one clutch per year.

FEEDING HABITS: Preferred foods include frogs, small snakes and eels, salamanders, crayfish, fish, and occasionally mice and grasshoppers caught on visits to open fields. The American Bittern feeds in marshes, meadows, and along edges of shallow ponds, standing motionless with neck outstretched and level bill, eyes focused down into the water, slowly aiming its bill before suddenly darting downward to seize the prey.

RANGE: The breeding range of the American Bittern extends from Newfoundland west to Manitoba and British Columbia; south to Maryland and west through Oklahoma and Kansas to southern California. This bittern also breeds very rarely in the Gulf States. It winters from the Carolinas south to the Bahamas, Cuba and Panama, and occasionally as far north along the east coast of Massachusetts. American Bitterns return to Massachusetts marshes in April.



POPULATION STATUS: In Massachusetts the American Bittern is classified as an “Endangered” species. Since 1980, NHESP has received reports of American Bitterns at 75 locations during the breeding season. Population trend is not known.

*Originated: 1986
Updated: 2006*